



Commonalities and differences in Japanese-language text setting among traditional and Western-based genres

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Since the late 19th century, Japanese musicians have adopted a plethora of Western vocal genres from art songs to hip-hop while maintaining their traditional ones. However, as the Japanese language has completely different syntax, vocabulary, accent patterns, and phonemes from European languages, setting Western musical genres in Japanese text is not a simple translation exercise but requires a reworking of text-setting technique. This paper describes how linguistic differences between Japanese and European languages impact text setting, how text setting is treated in Japanese traditional music, and how Japanese text setting in Western musical style has evolved to reflect aspects of traditional practice within this new framework.

Western European poetry often features a constant number of syllables, with stress-accented syllables (of longer duration and louder volume) in fixed positions. This repeating pattern fits Western music, with its musical meters marked by a regular pattern of downbeats, on which the stressed syllables are placed. On the other hand, the Japanese language lacks stress accents; instead, each mora, or shortest prosodic unit, is spoken with the same duration. Musically, this characteristic translates into a long series of equally timed notes rather than the alternating strong-weak pattern of Western music. Much of Japanese traditional music is either free rhythmic, highly flexible in rhythm within a metered context, or shifting in meter—solutions less commonly found in Western music.

Furthermore, Japanese contains pitch accents; if the melody veers too far from them, words can become awkward to sing or unintelligible to the listener, given the large number of homonyms. When the linguist Kindaichi first heard the war song “Hisshō no Uta” (1943), he mistook the phrase “Uta de yamaji no” for “Singing a song as I walked along the mountain path” rather than the actual text, “We will not stop fighting until we win,” because the composer had set the wrong morae on higher pitches. Much of Japanese traditional singing is highly melismatic, but some syllabically sung traditional genres, such as *biwa* narrative, show sensitivity to pitch accent.

A third linguistic issue is the multisyllabic nature of Japanese. Not only do most words contain many syllables, but also nouns require particles, and verbs require auxiliary verbs, to form meaningful units. To say “I love you” can require 14 morae in Japanese. In order for lyrics to be understood, textual phrases should match musical ones; however, the lengthy phrases of Japanese make such matching difficult.

The paper describes the treatment of these linguistic factors through analyses of traditional children's songs (*warabeuta*), Westernized school songs of the late 19th and

early 20th centuries (*shōka*), and art songs in Western style to be sung to children (*dōyō*) of 1920–30s. The analyses compare musical phrase lengths in relation to the text, examine methods used to highlight key words in the text, and assess the degree of correspondence among pitch accents in the text, musical pitch, and metrical accent.

As an example, *dōyō* composers were conscious of setting pitch accents on higher melodic pitches. While the lyrics of “Karatachi no Hana” (Fig. 1) consist of six couplets, inviting a strophic approach, Yamada Kōsaku capitalizes on variations in pitch-accent patterns, creating melodies that change from verse to verse to fit these accents perfectly. In the third couplet, the second line starts with the beginning-accented “I-tsu-mo I-tsu-mo,” in contrast to the first couplet’s middle-accented “shi-RO-i shi-RO-i”; the contour of the melody changes accordingly. The rhythm also mimics the spoken language. A conventional text setting would have attempted to fit each 12-morae line of verse into a four-measure phrase, which would have obligated a pause in the middle of the line, separating syntactically related phrases. Yamada shifts between 3/4 and 2/4 meters so that the phrase is sung continuously—just as it would be in normal speech.

Fig. 1 – “Karatachi no Hana” (Quince Flower, 1925), First and third couplets

ka - RA-TA-CHI NO|ha-NA ga|sa-I-TA YO.// shi-RO-i/ shi-RO-i|ha - NA ga|sa -I-TA YO.//
 The quince flower has bloomed. A white, white flower has bloomed.

ka - RA-TA-CHI WA|ha-TA no|ka KI-NE yo //I-tsu-mo / I-tsu-mo|TO - o -ru|mi-CHI DA -yo.//
 The quince forms the hedge of a field. Always, always, I pass by that road.

The principles of text-setting evident in the examples—keeping word units together, matching textual and musical phrases, maintaining natural speech rhythm, and reflecting pitch accents—are similar between some traditional genres and Western genres. Hence, the musical settings allow one to deduce the laws of timing and intonation that are apparently indispensable to the comprehension of the Japanese language.

Short biography

Noriko Manabe is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Music at Princeton University. She recently completed a Ph.D. in ethnomusicology and music theory at CUNY Graduate Center. Her dissertation research was conducted under a SSRC/JSPS Fellowship at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies in Kyoto. Manabe's articles, which have addressed Japanese rap, new media and the music business, Cuban music, and Italian-language opera, have appeared in *Ethnomusicology*, *Asian Music*, *Latin American Music*, *Transcultural Music Review*, and several edited volumes, including *Internationalizing Internet Studies: Beyond Anglophone Paradigms* (New York: Routledge, 2009). She has presented papers at numerous conferences, including the annual conferences of the Society for Ethnomusicology, Society for Music Theory, Society for American Music, Experience Music Project Pop Conference, and the biennial conferences of IASPM International, IASPM América Latina, and International Musicological Society.